

TSENG KWONG CHI

Canadian, born Hong Kong, 1950, died New York, 1990

Mount Rushmore, South Dakota, 1986 from the self-portrait series *East Meets West, 1979–1989, 1986*

Gelatin silver print, selenium-toned, 36 x 36 inches

Purchased by the Block Museum Board of Advisors in honor of Provost Daniel Linzer for his dedication to the arts at Northwestern and to the Block Museum of Art, 2017.4.1

There he is. The punctuating presence of a fetching young man in a Zhongshan suit (famously worn by Mao Zedong) stares up at the faces of former US presidents on Mount Rushmore National Memorial. Tseng Kwong Chi made an art of performing the self, producing photographs in which he embedded his body within and amidst a range of landscapes and social scenarios. From 1979 until his premature death from AIDS in 1990, he made a series of self-portraits: posing with guests at the 1980 Met Gala, nightlife revelers at Danceteria, boozy Rockaway beach bums, or at iconic European and US sites like the Brooklyn Bridge and the Eiffel Tower; in each assuming a casual snapshot pose and facing the camera directly.

Many of Tseng's photographs are developed as large-scale gelatin silver prints. Between the sheen of the material, the grayscale of the image, and the glass of the frame, a spectator becomes embedded in the work as a reflection. Tseng is there too, an anchor in the image, but not quite available to you. If you are looking at him, he's looking at something, or someone, more important than you.

Tseng created the self-portrait series *East Meets West, 1979–1989* in the final five years of his life. In these photographs, the scale of the print mimics the grand, Imperialist ambitions of North American landscape photography. He captures himself amidst the vistas of the Canadian Rockies, the North Dakota Grasslands, and the Grand Canyon, critically appropriating a photographic tradition tainted by its role as a facilitator of Euro-US settler colonialism and Indigenous dispossession. If, as Iyko Day writes, Tseng's "photographs prompt a recognition of landscape as both a biopolitical expression of white supremacy and a personification of white male domination," Mount Rushmore is the ultimate embodiment of this conceit.¹

He looks so little. A gay Asian man facing the imposing white edifice of patriarchal power. He is consumed by the landscape. Later, he will be consumed by the plague while the most powerful white men look on, unfeeling.

There he is. He isn't here anymore.

—Joshua Chambers-Letson
Professor of Performance Studies

¹ Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 79.